a very good essay

An Essay

Read March 15th.
1826

on the

Necessity of attending to
The clothing of Patients,
In the treatment of diseases.

By

John A. Cunningham
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An Essay &c.

The great difference of success in the treatment of diseases, arising from an attention to the secondary remedies, must be noticed by every one who has an opportunity of observing the practice of the same physician, in private families and in a public hospital. The want of success in hospital practice, I am convinced, is not owing more to the worn out and debilitated constitutions which we meet with in such places, than it is to a deficiency of those little attentions, which are beyond the reach of the friendless and poor, and enjoyed by those only, who are well situated in life. Look at the difference

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of success attending the practice, in a badly & in a well regulated hospital? in the Alms House Infirmary and the Penn^a Hospital, for example: we meet with the same kinds of constitutions in both places; yet, how much oftener are the physicians of the latter place gratified by the recovery of their patients, than those of the former. We cannot, for a moment, suppose that this is owing to any superiority of talents or professional acquirements, possessed by the Hospital physicians; it can be owing to nothing but the causes above mentioned.

Among the secondary remedies, which are too often neglected, is included, an attention to the dress or clothing of the patient; the importance of which must be readily understood, by all who reflect on the effects of Atmospherical vicissitudes on the functions of the skin, and on the sympathies existing between it and the

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internal organs. On this important part of the treatment of diseases, I now offer a few remarks, which have been suggested to me by different authors, during the course of my medical studies. There are few writers on the treatment of diseases, who do not say something on this part of it; yet the subject is generally passed over by them in a manner not at all calculated to impress upon the mind of the student, its due degree of importance.

In order to render the importance of this subject manifest, it will be necessary to say something on the effects of Atmospherical vicissitudes on the functions of those organs most immediately exposed to them, and on the sympathies between these & the internal organs.

That sudden changes in the atmosphere, by which we are surrounded, act powerfully on the living body, is rendered evident to every one

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by his own corporeal feelings. Not only the invalid, but even the most healthy are affected by them, as we may easily perceive by noticing the looks and listening to the complaints of those we meet, during any sudden change in the weather. We might expect that the functions of those organs immediately exposed to the influence of the atmosphere would be affected when the mercury of the thermometer rises so much above in Summer, and falls so much below in Winter, the mean temperature. We find it to be so: the skin performs its functions much more actively in Summer, and less so in Winter, than in a moderate temperature. In warm weather the secretion of the skin, which is insensible when the weather is mild, becomes so much increased as to be evident to the senses and we have copious perspiration. The contrary takes place when the weather is

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cold; as we may know from the dry, husky feel of the skin; this secretion, when properly performed, giving to the skin that moist pleasant feel denominated healthy. "The lungs, says Dr Johnson in his work on the Liver, 'which are ever in contact with the atmosphere, experience the most unequivocal impressions from the changes of the seasons. In summer when the air is mild and warm, the skin in a perspirable state and the fluids determined to the surface of the body, the lungs are free and the chest expansive. In winter and spring the fluids are determined from the surface of the body towards the internal organs and then the lungs become oppressed (particularly in delicate people) and the extensive catalogue of pulmonic complaints attains its zenith."

The power which the human frame possesses, of adapting itself to the gradual changes from

from Winter to Summer, and vice versa, under these comparatively harmless. That the system does accomodate itself to these changes, is proved by the well known fact that the first warm weather of the early part of Summer, is much more disagreable and oppressive to us than even the heat of Midsummer; and again by our being much more sensitive of cold in the commencement, than in the middle of Winter. But the system requires time to accomodate itself to these changes: This is both proved by, and accounts for, the frequency of those diseases which arise from this cause, during the Spring and Fall of the year, when the thermometer varies so often and so many degrees. "It is the sudden diurnal, rather than the slow annual vicissitude that induces such disturbance in the movements of the living machine."

It is true our Creator has bestowed upon

our bodies, the power of preserving their temperature very nearly the same, whatever may be the changes in that of the circumambient air; provided, they are not so great as to cause disorganization, or to destroy life. But we must not suppose that, because the body possesses this power, it can exercise it with impunity: it requires but little observation to convince us of the contrary. The body can resist the effects of these changes for a short time, as it does the operation of other powerful causes; but it is materially injured by the frequent repetition of them. We readily and perfectly recover from the effects of a single dose of opium; but what are the consequences of the habitual use of this article? A necessary consequence is that unnatural activity in the functions of the skin, which is excited by warmth, is, that the exhaling vessels will be debilitated and

afterwards be more easily rendered torpid on exposure to cold. Again, when from long exposure to an atmosphere of a low temperature, the superficial vessels have been rendered torpid, the sudden application of heat excites in them an inordinate activity; this we see thus exemplified in the great redness of a persons face, on his coming into a warm room after being for some time exposed to a cold wind. The reaction of parts of the body, which have been exposed to great cold and then too suddenly subjected to the influence of heat, is sometimes so great as to cause their destruction; as we see in the case of frostbitten extremities.

The effects of Thermometrical changes, on the functions of the skin, are greatly increased by several circumstances. In fact, whatever tends to debilitate the superficial vessels, renders them more subject to the influence of atmospherical vicissitudes. A person who has been

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engaged in violent exercise, so as to perspire very freely, is apt to have the process of perspiration entirely stopped, on his ceasing and remaining quiet, even in the same atmosphere in which he had taken his exercise, unless the temperature of this atmosphere be warm. The effects of changes of temperature are greatly increased when accompanied by changes in the moisture of the air.

But as Dr. Johnson observes "These (derangements in the functions of the skin) are only the first links in the chain of cause and effect". Were the effects limited to a mere derangement or even stoppage, for a time, of the perspiratory process, the injury would not be so great: these might be counteracted for a time by vicarious discharges from other parts of the body. But through the medium of the various sympathies between the skin & the internal organs, the morbid

effect is extended to the latter, when the changes are violent. Dr Johnson, in his work mentioned above, has explained these sympathies in a much more lucid and satisfactory manner than any author with whose writings I am acquainted: to him I am principally indebted for the explanations which I shall attempt to give, of them.

1 First of that between the Skin & the lungs, or as Dr J calls it, the Cutaneo-Pulmonic sympathy. This is exemplified by the cold bath: when the body is immersed in water of a temperature considerably below its own, there is at first an increased quickness of respiration and even hunting for breath to be observed in all, but especially in persons of a delicate habit. This difficulty of breathing is caused by a torpor in the capillary vessels of the lungs, which causes the blood to be with difficulty transmitted through them, and which

is sympathetic with that of the cutaneous vessels, produced at the instant of immersion. When the body is perfectly healthy, reaction soon takes place and the balance of the circulation is restored. But should the person have been previously fatigued by too much exercise, should the superficial vessels have been excited by excessive perspiration or by any other cause, then the attempt which the system makes to restore the balance in the circulation is not effectual; the reaction is not sufficient to overcome the torpor of the cutaneous vessels & the consequences are more or less injurious according to the state of the constitution.

2 That between the Skin and the Stomach, the Cutaneo-gastric. One of the most frequent instances illustrating this sympathy is where cold or wet is applied to the feet, occasioning pain or indigestion in the Stomach. It is also

proceed by the great gastric distress in most of the Exanthematic, preceding the eruption and the sudden relief from this distress on its appearance. Dr Chapman in his lectures relates a case which fell under his own observation, strongly illustrating this sympathy. A lady being made violently sick by eating of Rock-fish which was a little tainted, was greatly relieved by an eruption on the skin, which soon made its appearance. Some time after warned about a year if I recollect aright this lady, at a dinner party, was low to the head of the table at which a rock-fish was placed; she was immediately made sick at the sight of it, and on being removed into another room in a few moments an eruption appeared on the skin, precisely similar to that which she had had on the former occasion; she was again greatly relieved by it.

3 That between the Stm. and the bowels, the

Cutaneo-intestinal. This is frequently rendered manifest in the same manner as the last by the application of cold or wet to the lower extremities. It is admitted by all writers on the subject, that a check to the progress of perspiration, is one of the most frequent causes of bowel complaints.

4 That between the Skin and the Kidneys, the Cutaneo-renal. This is evinced by the vicarious increase of urine, when, from any cause, the perspiration is checked or diminished in quantity.

5 That between the Skin and the Liver, the Cutaneo-hepatic. Dr Johnson claims, and I believe justly, the credit of being the first to notice and explain this important sympathy. Its existence he has proved, in the most satisfactory manner, in his work "On the Influence of Tropical Climates". To give all the arguments, by which he establishes this fact, is more than the limits of this essay

wide allow me to do: to make a selection of them, would be doing him injustice. I must be content then to refer the reader to his work; merely observing that has proved, that the Biliary secretion follows a law directly opposite to the general one viz "that the internal secretions are increased proportionally as that of the perspiration is diminished. The Biliary secretion is an exception to this law; and is increased by a warm and diminished by a cold atmosphere, exactly as the perspiration

It would be an endless labour, to attempt to trace the other sympathies between the different parts of the body: it would be useless, since explanations of the most important of them are to be found in the most common medical works. I have attempted an explanation of the above, as being more immediately connected with and elucidating the importance of, my subject. A

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moments reflection on them, will point out the necessity of an attention to the dress of the patient as a preventive of disease: in this light, its importance is understood and acknowledged by all. But its benefits extend much farther than this; we may receive assistance from it, even when disease has actually made its attack and the system calls aloud for medical aid: whilst we are employing the active, we should not neglect the secondary remedies; especially this, one of the most important of them. Disease is not to be put to flight and driven from the system, by mere force; it is necessary for us, to meet it at all points, and to take every advantage of it, however small, that circumstances may throw in our way.

Now I to attempt to show in what diseases and under what circumstances, an attention to the dress of the patients is necessary, I should

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assume a task almost without limits. Of the many diseases to which the human frame is subject, it would be difficult to name even a few, in which it would not be beneficial. The advantages, however, to be derived from it, are most conspicuous in in the treatment of visceral diseases, whether of the Thorax or the Abdomen: I shall therefore confine my remarks to these.

By consulting the best writers, it will be found, that Atmospherical vicissitudes are mentioned amongst ~~the~~ most frequent exciting causes of much the largest proportion of the diseases of the Thorax. We shall also find amongst the symptoms, mentioned as most frequently attendant on these diseases, the following, viz a disorder in the functions of the skin; a check to that insensible perspiration, which gives to the skin its most pleasant feel; and a great sensibility to the impressions of cold. These symptoms are not

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only attendant at the commencement of these diseases, but accompany them throughout their course. Nature thus gives us one of the clearest indications in their treatment. They are not like contagious fevers; they do not, when once excited, become independent of their causes, but are made worse and worse by a repetition of them. We should therefore be as careful in obviating these causes, as we would be in removing from an inflamed eye, or other part, any foreign body which kept up the inflammation which it had excited. A removal of the foreign body from the part, is, alone, often sufficient completely to put a stop to the inflammation. By restoring the functions of the skin in these diseases of the thorax, caused by a derangement of these functions, we have every reason to expect, at least a similar, if not an equally perfect result.

Dr Thomas in his Practice, observes that "Tubercles (in the Lungs) are evidently induced and accelerated in Winter and retarded in Summer." Why this is so it is easy to comprehend: in winter the body is constantly liable to the sudden application of cold air, and precisely the same effect is produced by this as that caused by immersing the body in the cold bath: there is a determination of the blood to the internal parts; and as there is generally in these diseases a torpor of the cutaneous vessels, the reaction, when it takes place, will not be sufficient to restore the balance in the circulation and the lungs will remain oppressed by an undue quantity of blood. What Dr T remarks is then no more than what we might reasonably expect to take place. He goes on to observe "A person gets a dry cough in Winter or Spring which goes off as the Summer advances and was regarded as a Catarrh, but

tubercles were forming; if therefore such a person could be removed to a warm climate before the winter comes on, he might escape an attack at this period, and by remaining there for a few years, may be perfectly recovered. Going to a warm climate is not merely avoiding what might be injurious; it is applying a remedy which has the best chance of proving beneficial".

A removal to a warm climate is certainly the best remedy that can be advised in these cases; especially when the patient is young, has to take a sea-voyage. It would be difficult, however, to find a country, the climate of which is so constantly mild and free from vicissitudes, as to render an attention to dress unnecessary. But circumstances seldom admit of the patient's changing his residence; we seldom find him willing to make the change; Home at all times 'sweet' is doubly so to the invalid. Since then, we

have no choice, we must endeavour, as far as we can to obtain by other means, effects similar to those derived from a mild climate or a sea voyage. The good effects of these are to be attributed principally, to the great regularity, which they admit of, in the process of perspiration. We must endeavour then in the treatment of these diseases, to obtain this regularity of the respiration; and we certainly can obtain it, in a very great degree by a strict attention to the dress of the patients

In diseases of Abdominal viscera we have the same symptoms, which we mentioned above as being attendant on affections of the lungs. These diseases are equally aggravated by a repetition of their causes, and mitigated by a removal of them. A warm climate or a sea voyage would be equally beneficial in chronic affections of the Abdominal viscera as in

Pulmonic complaints; and for the same reasons: but, as we have said before, this is advice which the patient seldom has either the inclination or the power, to follow. We should here, then, pursue the course which we then advised: we should endeavour to restore, by such means as are within our reach, the healthy functions of the skin, and to protect the patient against the influence of Atmospherical vicissitudes.

There is another circumstance which renders an attention to the functions of the skin, particularly necessary, in the management of these affections. From the sympathy between the skin and the liver we might expect that a deranged secretion of bile would also be an attendant symptom; this is so; this symptom almost invariably attends what are commonly termed, 'Bowel complaints.' "After a long attention to Dysentery, says Dr Johnson, as it affected great numbers under

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my case and also as it affected myself in person, I am confidently of opinion that two functions appeared to be constantly disordered from the beginning & which either seem produced, or were accompanied by other derangements. These were the functions of the skin and of the liver, or perspiration & the biliary secretion." In chronic sciatica also the liver will generally be found more or less disordered in its functions. From the intimate sympathies between those of the abdominal viscera concerned in the processes of digestion, sanguification &c, it is intuitible for any one of them to become diseased without causing more or less derangement in the rest. "If, says Dr Ayre in his work on Marasmus, any one of these functions become deranged, it is liable to throw one or more of the others into disorder; the measure as well as the nature of this derangement varying from variations in the degrees of sympathetic

relation of these organs to each other." In diseases of these organs the liver may also become deranged in its functions, as may be known from the colour of the stools, showing a deficiency, or an irregularity in the secretion, of the bile. It is frequently so much so that to restore its healthy functions becomes one of the principal indications in the cure of these diseases. It is by fulfilling this indication that Mr. Abernethy's celebrated method of treating "diseases in the digestive organs" has been found so frequently successful. We thus see that the liver is either primarily, or secondarily affected in a very large proportion of the diseases of the abdominal viscera. When it is recollected that a restoration of its healthy functions is almost a sine qua non towards the recovery of the patient; when it is also recollected how much that will depend upon a restoration of the healthy functions of

the skin, the necessity of attending strictly to the clothing of the patients must be obvious to every one.

The limits of this essay oblige me to treat my subject in a manner much more superficial than it deserves, and than I could wish: I trust however that what I have said will render it evident, that in giving our advice on this subject it is necessary for us to be much more particular than physicians generally are. We must not, as is too often the case, rest satisfied with merely saying to the patient, Sir you must attend to your dress: you must guard against catching cold. If he attends at all to our advice when given in this way, nine times in ten he will go farther than we wish, and cover himself with too much and too warm clothing. This, by causing an excessive action in the

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cutaneous vessels enfeebles them and renders him more liable to a total suppression of the perspiration on exposure to cold. He should explain to the patient himself, or his friends in attendance on him, the object we have in view, which should always be to restore the healthy functions of the skin; to elicit that insensible perspiration the secretion of which is absolutely necessary towards the restoration of the health and comfortable feelings of the patient. He should regulate his clothing according to the seasons; wear only just enough to make him feel perfectly comfortable, to protect him against the effects of any sudden change in the weather, and no more.